

4x4

*Regan Good*

1. I publish randomly and sporadically in journals. I send work out in a very unorganized way, when I am asked to submit or when the mood strikes me. I also write slowly (I often keep poems open and unfinished for years) so I don't have an endless supply of available work. I am always shocked and pleased when poems get taken. But I don't know what good such journals do. To be honest, I have grown pretty skeptical of their proliferation, on the Internet and otherwise. On a glass half full day, I'd say: How great that there is so much interest in and appreciation for poetry in the 21st century. It's natural to replace the old dogs with new blood. But I fear more is afoot than love of poetry. There is a lot of misplaced ambition in the air. The ambition should be to write better and better poems, not, as one graduate school peer put it, to "get famous." I feel like poetry is being used in a way I'm not sure we've seen before. I shrink from it.

2. I return again and again to Emily Dickinson's letter to Higginson: "I smile when you suggest I delay 'to publish,' that being foreign to my thought as firmament to fin. If fame belonged to me, I could not escape her; if she did not, the longest day would pass me on the chase, and the approbation of my dog would forsake me then. My barefoot rank is better." Romantic (or coy) as it may sound, she was concerned with and sustained by the work alone—i.e. she had no other ulterior motives. This is an idea that doesn't have a lot of purchase in a time of poetry professionalism. (Dickinson not needing publication was certainly helped by the fact she was a genius.)

But it's unclear how much it hurt her emotionally not to publish or be recognized; she seemed to have wanted nothing to do with "the world" outside her mind, especially after a certain point. But the fact she sent Higginson poems suggests

that she too wanted to be appreciated by at least one other soul. Dickinson never had a book of poems published in her lifetime. And how does that bear on her achievement? Not at all. As the painter Agnes Martin wrote: "The life of an artist is inspired, self-sufficient and independent (unrelated to society)." When I feel frustrated about this subject I sometimes think of the scene in *Babette's Feast* when Babette's rich and complex history is revealed to her long-time employers. Though the two sisters have known Babette as a lost soul, it comes to light that she had, among other things, been a renowned Chef de Cuisine in Paris before she landed on their bleak Danish isle. With her winnings from a Parisian lottery ticket Babette asks permission to create a magnificent feast. She purchases the finest china, tableware and ingredients. She labors in joy. She makes a magical, life-changing meal for a gaggle of crotchety Danes. When her employers note she has foolishly spent all her winnings and will now be poor forever, she answers: "An artist is never poor."

3. I was lucky enough to study with two excellent poets during the two years of my MFA at Iowa: Jorie Graham and Jim Galvin. They were great opposites, her Whitman to his Dickinson. One was riveted, effusive, and spoke in meta-poetics; the other was Zen-like, terse, and remote in his contemplation of the students' work. The first generously (more generously than we or the poems deserved) read our work as, say, artifacts of the journey of The Hero. Or she'd compare one's description of a bird to Giotto's birds in the Arena Chapel frescos. The other would pass out pieces of handmade paper and dare us to write on them. Or he'd write a Lakota death song on the blackboard, a song that ensured the warrior/writer passage to the afterlife. Two people knew the song, the warrior and his best friend. If the warrior fell, his friend would have to sing it for him. Galvin said: "Make sure your poems are as important to you as an Indian death song." This push-pull—being encouraged to reach for sublime, Olympian heights on the one hand, and, on the other hand, to

be reminded of one's paltry place in the pantheon—was good for me. Cosmic praise tempered by indifference.

Some students rolled their eyes at Galvin's seemingly sentimental insistence on work bearing such moral and mortal pressure. I don't know what would have happened if I had gone to another program with poets of lesser intensity, intelligence and commitment. Beyond studying with excellent mentors if you can find them, the second best thing about an MFA is that it will be the first time you are truly surrounded by people who do this unusual thing you do and take it just as seriously. You recognize each other. I am still bonded with many of my Iowa friends. But I am not in business with them. I don't think of myself as being in a community of writers, though certainly my best friends are writers and many of them I met in graduate school.

4. My mother read poems to me at an early age, mostly by Bishop, Lowell, and Roethke. Roethke was a favorite, probably because he sometimes wrote from the perspective of a child, especially in the greenhouse poems. Compounding my interest was the fact that our house had a stone cellar with a dirt floor so I recognized Roethke's striving vegetation—things weirdly living on in dank places, things bursting from dried husks to life. I turned images from poems like "Root Cellar" and "Frau Bauman, Frau Schmidt, and Frau Schwartz" over and over in my mind.

The first poem I wrote as a child described the contents of a window gutter—dead leaves, long-dead moths, spider webs with bundled flies, and a dead-spider "balled up like short black thread." As an adult, trees, oceans, gardens, horses, and birds, especially birds, populate the poems. I have had a fascination with bird life and bird movement for a while now. I took birds as my personal Objective Correlative while in Iowa City, and they have stuck around. Birds did things in the Mid-West I had never seen them do on the East Coast, like when literally hundreds

would settle into a single tree at the same moment. They were scary; they were bigger than I was in all ways. They stood for Nature in my mind. Looking at the birds began with an effort to remove my "will" from the poem, to simply watch the natural world long enough that it might reveal something to me.

The problem of nature—death—moves me more consistently than other things like politics or other traditional poetic themes. Sometimes I wish I could write good political poetry like Yeats or be moved by what moves my peers, like theory or pop culture. But I know my instrument pretty well. Someone recently referred to my writings as "weird nature poems" that exhibit a "skeptical awe." I love that description and took it as a compliment.